

STATEMENT

OF

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(FORCE MANAGEMENT AND PERSONNEL)

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON BENEFITS OVERSIGHT HEARING

ON

TRANSITION ASSISTANCE

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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**EMBARGOED UNTIL
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SUBCOMMITTEE**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the ongoing programs of the Air Force in addressing the transition needs of our military members and their families.

The Air Force continues to benefit from the partnership with the Department of Labor and the Department of Veterans' Affairs to equip separating and retiring personnel and their families with the skills and knowledge for reentry into the private sector. We emphasize the "whole concept" transition preparation rather than only job placement. Success occurs when our transitioning service members have identified post-military goals and we have provided them the tools, knowledge and resources to assist in achieving their goals. Throughout the process we emphasize the importance of planning for the change in their financial situation. Transition preparation also includes relocation issues, spouse employment, children's education, and change in the family or personal routine. Our comprehensive approach helps to prepare the transitioner to make this significant career and life change with much less stress and with a spirit of confidence.

The best testament to any program comes from those for whom the service was designed. Here are just a few quotes from our service personnel: "I was ill prepared for my transition...I was extremely anxious for my wife as well as myself. The training your program gave me enabled me to attend my job interviews with a sense of anticipation instead of dread." Another airman stated, "Excellent process that assists individuals and families with making a smooth transition to the civilian community."

Another that typifies what we hear is, "The program is a great 'thank you' to people for serving their country. It provides them opportunities to plan career and life

changes...gives them a more positive attitude." Transition Assistance works, as many personnel tell us in their evaluations.

Effectiveness of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). What measures, if any, do we have?

As I mentioned before, we view success or effectiveness in this program when separating members set goals and we provide them with the ammunition to assist them in reaching them. Feedback from our major commands tells us that 96 percent of program alumni believed the program assisted them in meeting their transition goals. We exceed or meet program mandates to provide separation counseling not later than 90 days prior to separation/retirement, with the exception of our short notice separations. A recent Air Force audit reflected that 97% of our members received these services.

And thanks to our strong marketing and outreach efforts by the staff, program awareness is also extremely high. Program awareness is 95 percent of junior enlisted/company grade officers, 98 percent of senior enlisted/field grade officers, and 99 percent of base level leadership are familiar with the program. We are successfully informing and supporting our target audience in a proactive, timely manner.

Similarities and differences between the Services

Air Force TAP is provided in our Family Support Centers. Individuals identified as projected losses (normally 12 months prior to retirement or six months prior to separation) receive a mandatory referral to the Family Support Center for TAP counseling. However, they may choose to participate as early as 24 months before

retirement or 12 months before separation. Our members receive notification through commanders' calls, the base Community Action Information Board, first sergeants, local media publicity, electronic newsletters, local papers, etc.

The AF provides one-on-one TAP pre-separation counseling. In unique circumstances, major commands approve delivery of pre-separation counseling to groups of up to 10 personnel. However, one-on-one counseling remains the preferred standard, which addresses the unique needs of each individual, resulting in a more informed and prepared member.

The Air Force also provides supplemental pre-separation counseling on topics ranging from Social Security to individual state recruitment incentives. In addition, FSC personnel spend an average of another 1.3 hrs for members and 1.6 hrs for spouses in one-on-one transition counseling.

Air Force coordinates with Department of Labor (DoL) to conduct TAP Workshops on all AF bases in the U.S. Our Family Support Centers facilitate comparable TAP workshops at our overseas locations. While we continuously strive to ensure our overseas transitioning airmen receive the same level of support as those in CONUS, the additional workload of hosting a first-class TAP Workshop continues to challenge our FSC staff members. Attendance at a DoL workshop is voluntary and commanders consider it official duty. Every effort is made to limit attendance to a class size of 50. In the 1st quarter of FY02, a total of 3,862 personnel attended 207 DoL TAP Workshops. The DoL workshops consistently rated 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Additionally, FSC personnel conduct supplemental workshops to assist members with such tasks as resume writing, interviewing, job search, salary and benefits package negotiations, etc. Over 3,500 personnel attended 417 supplemental workshops in the first quarter of FY02. We encourage our airmen to return for further assistance as they progress through their transition. In the first quarter of FY02—23,007 visits were made by 8,515 members, at a rate of 2.7 visits per member. This not only shows that members are very interested in these services and are willing to return, but it also shows the dedication of the FSC staff to support their customers.

Family Support Center personnel actively market the Transition Assistance Program. FSC staff members conduct community outreach and networking both on and off base. Staff coordinates or collaborate in coordinating job fairs, career days, employer panels, etc. Reaching the right audience is a priority for FSC personnel. They spend a great deal of time contacting key personnel on our installations to maintain high awareness and use of these resources. In fact, we track the number of contacts/briefings by the FSC transition staffs with key base personnel. We are reaching our target audience.

Statistics addressing whether officers have greater access to or participate in the TAP program more than enlisted personnel. If this is true, is it characteristic of only some Services? Some bases? Some commanders?

While we do not have formal statistics, all Air Force members have full access to our Transition Assistance Program. We work to ensure that all airmen have the same opportunity to benefit from this service.

Does the ability to access TAP programs depend on the implementing commander (i.e., personality dependent)?

The ability to access TAP programs in the AF is independent of a commander's personality. We have very strong support from senior Air Force leadership, which has resulted in the successful institutionalization of the program as an integral part of the personnel life cycle.

The Marines mandate TAP for all exiting personnel. Is this true for the other Services?

TAP pre-separation counseling is mandatory for all departing AF members. Utilization of the program's other services is voluntary but highly encouraged. Based on their plans and goals, members are free to choose to participate in voluntary transition services. Fortunately the AF can accommodate all personnel who want to participate in the voluntary transition services.

The March 02 DoL statistics reveal young (20-24) minority veterans have exceptionally high rates of unemployment after discharge. Is this an anomaly or a trend?

We prepare each AF member to be as competitive for private sector employment as possible. Our continued emphasis on education and skills training throughout the military career cycle contributes to our personnel becoming excellent candidates for second careers of their choice.

Are there obstacles in law, which prevent greater program effectiveness? If so, what are they? What does the AF recommend to improve effectiveness of the TAP?

We do not perceive any legal barriers to program effectiveness. In fact, we continue to see proof that TAP is very effective at easing the transition to life after the military. Yet as a Service, we are seeking ways to better measure our effectiveness, and subsequently improve service delivery to our airmen and their families. At the same time, we must continue to ensure the best tools and training possible for our base level FSC transition staff.

As we referenced earlier, our Family Support Centers facilitate comparable TAP workshops at our overseas locations. While we continuously strive to ensure our overseas transitioning airmen receive the same level of support as those in CONUS, the additional workload of hosting a first-class TAP Workshop continues to challenge our FSC staff. A DoL presence overseas would provide valuable support to our FSC staff, enabling them to provide other transition services to our airmen. Until a change is made, Air Force will continue to use Family Support Transition staff at overseas locations to facilitate the workshops.

On a positive note, P.L. 107-103 expanded the pool of eligibles for TAP services by changing the access window from 180 days to 24 months for those contemplating retirement and 12 months for those planning to separate. We believe this law greatly enhanced members' preparation time and thus, increased opportunities and available service for members well in advance of their separation date.

Comment on the flexibility of the class offerings. Weekends? Evenings?

Spousal participation?

AF Commanders have the authority and flexibility to offer transition programs that best meet the needs of our personnel and their families.

Comment on Service participation in DTAP.

Disability Transition Assistance Program is available in conjunction with TAP at all AF bases. As a rule, it is an adjunct to the TAP workshop.

What parts of the program are working well? Are not working well?

The Transition Assistance Program remains a major success story! The program has an enviable track record that speaks for itself. The change that allowed access to the TAP program 24 months prior to separation was a great change for our personnel. To take full advantage of program benefits, an individual is well served by availing themselves of transition information several years prior to when they plan to separate or retire. Some of our installations began an initiative, where voluntary "Pre TAP" workshops are provided, with great interest from personnel not yet in the final phase of their military careers. These workshops focus on preparation 3-5 years prior to separation/retirement on the myriad of related transition issues from financial preparation and building networks, to spouse/family support. In this vein, we are actively considering a standardized mid-career counseling program under TAP to expose our Total Force members and their families to realities that transition from the military will involve. We will study the potential of this initiative as a retention tool. Certainly such counseling will highlight the advantages and benefits that come with a

long-term military career compared to the private sector and also grow a better informed, better prepared family once the decision to transition is made.

Thank you for your interest in these issues. The Air Force Transition Assistance Program is one of our great success stories and we look forward to continuing this very valuable service. We have many of the country's most motivated, highly skilled, and trained professionals. We take pride in doing our part in preparing them to lead productive post Air Force lives in their newfound neighborhoods and communities. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have.